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THE PRESENT STATUS OF THE EUROPEAN BISON OR WISENT

BY THEODOR G. AHRENS

Originally there existed two types or species of wild oxen in Europe: The ur (urus), auerochs, Slavonic tur = *Bos primigenius*; and the wisent, Polish zubr, Roumanian zimbr = *Bos bonasus* L. or *Bison europaeus*.

The ur had no mane, resembled our domestic cattle, but had larger horns. The wisent has a mane, long hair on neck and shoulders, a hump, short horns and is a counterpart of our American bison. The ur became extinct in Europe, with the exception of Russia and Poland, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Aristotle mentions the wisent in his history of animals with the title of "bonasos"; Pliny, Calpurnius Siculus, and Seneca describe it, referring to the Paeonian species. Pausanias and Dio Cassius (150-235 A.D.) speak of the wisents as "Paeonian bulls." Wisents and urs lived in Switzerland in the middle ages, but became extinct in France before 1400. The wisent is mentioned in Sweden in the eleventh century and wisent hunts are described in the Vilkina-saga, written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The wisent may have existed in England in the twelfth century, if certain references in the literature of the time may be believed, but the so-called "Wildwith cattle" in Chillingham Park and other herds of half-wild cattle in private estates are presumably descendants of the ur.

A classic mention of both species of wild cattle is to be found in the Nibelungenlied, the celebrated middle high German epic. Here the exploits of Siegfried, the principal hero of the poem, during a hunt in the Odenwald are described:

Dar nach sluoc er sciere einen wisent und einen elch,
Starker ure viere.

(After which he slew quickly a wisent and an elk, four powerful urs)

It should be mentioned that the words "auerochs" and "ur" have caused much confusion. These expressions were generally used for the wisent after the extinction of the ur in Germany. The word "wisent" was forgotten and did not come again into use until 1850, but has been generally used again since 1880. As "auerochs" was the official name for wisent—bison—zubr (Polish for wisent) from 1450 to 1850, we may be pretty sure that when "auerochs" is used in the literature of this

period, "wisent" is meant; but Baron Herberstein, who was German ambassador in Russia from 1516 to 1518, has correctly distinguished the two animals and illustrated them in his book "*Moscoviter wunderbare Historien*" (Wonderful Moscovite tales), calling the auerochs "auerox" and wisent "bisont."

The province of East Prussia, which belonged since 1511 to the Hohenzollerns, harbored a very considerable number of wisents. Many wisent hunts are mentioned in literature, and the animals enjoyed considerable protection. In 1726, 117 wisents were still counted, but in 1755 the last animal in East Prussia was killed by a poacher. In Brandenburg the wisent existed till the eighteenth century. It was carefully protected and in 1743 eleven were still accounted for. In 1768 the last Brandenburg wisent perished.

Wisents lived in Austria and Hungary throughout the middle ages, but became extinct there in the sixteenth century.

Finally the forest of Bieloviesh (Russian), Bialowies (German) or Bialowicza (Polish), in Lithuania near Grodno, and a district in the Caucasus Mountains are or were the only remaining regions in which any considerable numbers of indigenous wisents lived. To be sure, upon the estates of the Prince of Pless in southeastern Upper Silesia, and in Ascania Nova in southern Tauria (north of Crimea), belonging to the recently deceased F. von Falz-Fein, a small number were maintained, but these animals had been imported and were not indigenous.

The great forest of Bieloviesh had been a royal hunting preserve since the eleventh century and wisents could only be hunted there by special permission from the ruling dynasty. The Polish-Saxon kings protected the wisents and ceased to allow any economic use of the forest. After the dismemberment of Poland, the Russian czars continued this policy of protection so that up to our own times the forest remained a carefully protected sanctuary.

To give some idea of the hunts which took place in Bieloviesh under Polish rule, we learn that at one hunt, in 1744, 30 wisents were killed; 42 in 1752, and at the latter 1000 peasants were forced to act as beaters to drive the game together.

Since 1820 the czars prohibited the cutting down of trees and serious efforts were made to protect game in general, and wisents in particular. In 1860 the first imperial hunt took place. Two thousand peasants acted as beaters; many foreign princes and a great number of persons of all ranks were present. Twenty-eight wisents and much other game were killed. In 1897, 37 wisents were killed at an imperial hunt; in 1900, 45.

In 1828 Brincken remarks that: "à la fin de la dernière guerre le nombre des Bisons s'était diminué jusqu'à se réduire à 300."

Nevertheless in 1826 from 700 to 800 were counted; in 1829, 711; in 1830, 772; but in 1831, probably in consequence of revolutionary movements, 657 only. For the next fifty years this average must have been maintained; for in 1884-1885, 500, and in 1891, 479, were quoted. Thereupon a ukase of the 3/15 February, 1892, gave absolute protection to the wisents for all time, so that at the beginning of the present century more than 1200 are mentioned. In the following years severe epidemics broke out, so that only 727 remained in 1914. The war was naturally disastrous, so that when the German administration of the forest started, scarcely 160 remained. Since this event the wisents were counted every month as far as possible, and in March, 1917, the count showed 121, consisting of 18 old and 18 young bulls, 30 old and 36 young cows, and 19 calves. In 1918, after 30 square kilometers of the forest had been reserved as a natural sanctuary, the herd seems to have increased to 170 or 180 head.

The German efforts to protect the wisent began in March, 1915, when Professor Conwentz, head of the "Staatliche Stelle für Naturdenkmalpflege in Preussen" (Prussian Bureau for the Protection of Nature) called the attention of several army commanders in the East to the endangering of the wisent. The ninth army therefore caused a strict prohibition of wisent shooting to be issued, and on October 1, 1915, Captain (later Major) Escherich, a Bavarian Forstrat (forest commissioner), was appointed commander and head of the German forest administration of the occupied district.

Owing to the energetic efforts of this active and experienced forest official complete protection of the remainder of the wisent herd in this extensive forest, the inaccessible recesses of which rendered any control extremely difficult, was finally carried through.

As early as September 25, 1915, a ruling regarding hunting was issued by Lieutenant-General von Seckendorff, which declared: "We desire to preserve the Wisent herds as far as possible, although this is enemy territory, so as to convey to posterity a Natural Monument of peculiar value." Thus the best hopes for the future were entertained, but then came the collapse of the German power and the revolution of November, 1918. On December 16, 1918, shortly after the revolution, Major Escherich wrote to the "Staatliche Stelle": "In consequence of the events of the past weeks the military forest administration can no longer exercise any control over the protection of game in the forest

of Bialowies and consequently the Wisent herd of 170–180 head is seriously reduced. The imminent retreat of the German troops increases considerably the danger of extermination of the animals and thus extinction of the species is to be feared.” In fact it seems that all or nearly all the remaining wisents have been shot by the inhabitants and the retiring German soldiers, among whom discipline had been undermined by the revolution. Notwithstanding, Professor Matschie of Berlin, who is well acquainted with the territory, told me that in his opinion it is very possible that wisents may still exist in impenetrable thickets of the forest. Unfortunately, there has been no corroboration of this view.

About the end of the seventeenth century the first news of wisents in the Caucasus reached Europe. Since then little was known of the species till Professor Filatow made three trips to the district between 1909 and 1911 for the express purpose of studying the animals. The Caucasian wisent varies but slightly from the type in Bieloviezh; the shape of the skull and the horns, which resemble those of the American bison, being the chief peculiarities. It is known as *Bos (Bison) bonasus caucasicus* Grevé. At one time the Caucasian wisent lived in the district of Mount Elbrus, but its territory has been reduced to a comparatively small area in the Kuban region in northwestern Caucasia. Cutting down of the forests was the chief cause for the diminution. The last known area, where Caucasian wisents lived is as follows: Its northern limit is south of the towns of Atschcha and Atscheschbok, then along the bend of the Umschten and Schischa Rivers to the mouth of the Besymjanka, and somewhat south at the mouth of the Maltschepa. The whole area is 50 versts between east and west and 20 versts between north and south. According to Filatow, the number of animals was “scarcely less than 100, but under no conditions as many as 1000.” Since the revolution the Kuban cossacks have demanded the return to them of these hunting grounds, which had been leased by them to the Grand Duke Sergius Michaelowitsch who endeavored to protect the wisents there, and thus an extermination of the species is also to be feared. Professor Matschie thinks that the remaining Caucasian wisents have abandoned their old range and emigrated to other regions, at present unknown.

The herd of Pless above mentioned was founded in 1864 or 1865, when a bull and three or four cows were presented to Prince Pless by Czar Alexander II. and the former placed them in his extensive estates in southwestern Upper Silesia. The animals increased there consid-

erably. In 1893, 5 more cows were introduced from Bieloviesh. In 1918 there were about 60 animals there, but according to Professor Pax of Breslau the animals in Pless have been severely decimated since the German revolution and total extermination is to be feared at the hands of poachers.

The present war between Poland and the Bolsheviki has again passed over the Bieloviesh region, continuous disturbances are taking place in the Caucasus, and Upper Silesia is in perpetual unrest because of the differences and antipathies between Poles and Germans. Besides the wisents still extant in Pless, and possibly in Ascania Nova, there remain a few specimens in zoological gardens. But, if we sum up, we must nevertheless conclude that the extinction of the species is imminent.

There exists a very extensive literature upon the wisent, of which a few works may be quoted:

1. Baron de Brincken: *Mémoire descriptif sur la Forêt Impériale de Bialowicza en Lithuanie*. Varsovie, 1828.
2. von Jarocki, Felix Paul: *Zubr oder der lithauische Auerochse*. Hamburg, 1830.
2. Eichwald, E.: *Naturhistorische Skizzen von Lithauen, Volhynien und Podolien*. Wilna, 1830.
4. Büchner, Eugen: *Das allmähliche Aussterben des Wisents im Forste von Bjelowjeska*. St. Petersburg, 1895.
5. Bialowies in deutscher Verwaltung. Herausgegeben von der Militärforstverwaltung Bialowies. 1 und 2 Heft, 1917. 3 und 4 Heft, 1918. 5 Heft, 1919. Berlin.

Besides countless articles and essays in hunting periodicals, in the literature appertaining to the protection of nature, etc.

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